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Spotlighting the FBI

THE APPREHENSION of the Federal Bureau of Investigation that last week's citizens' inquiry would result in a lopsided lambasting was largely unjustified.

As it turned out, the Conference on the FBI at Princeton University faithfully mixed its criticism with some solid support and meaningful insights into the agency built by J. Edgar Hoover.

To be sure, there was an abundance of shrill denunciations from professional FBI haters of long standing and it was true that Princeton's Duane Lockard, conference chairman, loaded the sessions with plenty of critics.

As Lockard explained yesterday, "How else could you have a conference" on FBI procedures and its role in society "without inviting mostly critics?"

But whether out of a sense of fair play or because the conference was indeed rigged, individuals saw to it that the FBI got its due along with its lumps. For example, Burke Marshall, former assistant attorney general in the Kennedy administration, listened to alleged FBI informers and wondered aloud whether they should have even been invited.

Chairman Lockard also invited Frank Carrington and Richard Wright of the conservative Americans for Effective Law Enforcement, Inc., of Chicago and then saw to it they were given every opportunity to criticize the critics.

IN THE CONCERN over whether the FBI was getting a fair shake or not, probably the best and certainly the most complete explanation of the bureau's role in civil rights was nearly ignored.

It was prepared by Dorothy Landsberg and John Doar, who served in the Justice Department's civil rights division from 1960 to 1967.

In the unlikely event that an official body held a similar hearing on the FBI, this paper would be an invaluable model of objectivity, personal knowledge and ability.

To the long-standing criticism that the FBI dragged its feet on civil rights, Doar pointedly replied that neither the government nor the American people were ready, in 1960, for the civil rights revolution but that the law had involuntarily enlisted the FBI.

Documenting FBI failures between 1960 and 1964, Doar said:

"The bureau was ill-prepared for its predicament. Is it any wonder it delivered such a lackluster performance? FBI field offices in the South were neglected and undermanned. There were no bureau manuals on the detection of discriminatory selection of voters.

"Voter discrimination itself had not yet been clearly or specifically defined. The bureau supervisors established in high posts at the seat of government knew only the myths published by the disciples of the solid South."

But with the buildup of violence in Mississippi in 1964, a series of events produced, Doar said, a "magnificent change" in FBI performance.

THE EVENTS included the murder of three young civil rights workers; an examination of the Mississippi situation by former CIA Director Allen Dulles and Hoover himself, plus the opening of an FBI office in Jackson, Miss., and the assignment of more than 150 agents to the state.

After that, Doar said, the FBI "demonstrated in some of the toughest law enforcement assignments imaginable, exactly how and why it had earned its reputation for thoroughness, persistence and toughmindedness in responsible law enforcement."

In solving major rights cases involving the Ku Klux Klan, Doar supported the FBI's use of paid informants, infiltration, wiretapping and other tactics soundly criticized by others at the conference as infringements on constitutional rights.

Several conference participants asked if Doar's approval of FBI methods in fighting the Klan might also be applied to such groups as the Black Panthers or the Weatherman faction of Students for a Democratic Society.

The responses were so diverse that even the FBI would be satisfied of a bonafide cross section of opinion.